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ABSTRACT

In an examination of some relationships between culture, assertiveness, decisionmaking, and self image among Chinese Americans, this paper focuses on themes such as: (1) how cultural factors impinge on individual capability to be assertive; (2) specific ways in which cultural conditioning affects decisionmaking skills and other behavior patterns; and (3) the impact of culture on the development of self image. Differences between traditional Chinese and American family systems and traditional Chinese and American classroom settings are outlined, and special attention is given to the influence of stereotyped portrayals in school resource materials and of television on the behavior patterns of Chinese Americans. The implications of cultural conditioning in the classroom are also discussed. Taken into consideration are the advances made by the Chinese American movement and the role that identification with this movement has played in increasing self awareness, assertiveness, and involvement in decisionmaking within this group. (EB)

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# CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON ASSERTIVENESS AND SELF-IMAGE

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In an examination of some relationships between culture, assertiveness, decision-making and self-image, this paper focusses on themes such as: 1) how cultural factors impinge on individual capability to be assertive; 2) specific ways in which cultural conditioning affect decision-making skills and other behavior patterns and; 3) the impact of culture on the development of self-image. Although the concern here is mainly with the Chinese, due in large part to the writer's personal experience and knowledge as a bicultural, many of the observations pertinent to this group are applicable in varying degrees to other groups, such as the Chicano, Japanese American, Native American, and the Pilipino American

## Culture as a Factor in Developing Assertive and Decision-making Behaviors

As a personality trait, assertiveness seems to be culturally induced. As a personal attribute, it is admired and cultivated in dominant American culture; but not in traditional Chinese culture. By and large, however, assertiveness as a value and behavior seems to be experienced in significantly different ways by offspring in dominant white American culture and children in a traditional Chinese family structure. And, when one compares some of the cultural patterns experienced in family as well as educational settings in dominant white culture with those experienced in a traditional Chinese family and classroom setting, there appear striking contrasts in terms of parent-child and teacher-child

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relationships as well as in decision-making processes used.

In looking at American and Chinese family systems, Francis Hsu states:

> The difference between Chinese and American homes reflects their contrasting patterns of behavior in the family. (And while) ...many good things have happened to the Chinese parent-child relationship ...in order to understand the contrasting lifestyles of the two peoples (Americans and Chinese), we must explore the long lasting parent-child bases that have nurtured them.[1]

However, it should be borne in mind that ..."when an American speaks of a family he refers to parents and unmarried children; a Chinese includes grandparents and in-laws."[2] In order to appreciate the pervasive influence of the Chinese family and kinship system it is well to note that:

> In cases where grandparents do not share the same roof with them, during a brief visit the older couple can do almost anything they see fit in regard to the children, even if it means going over the parents' heads. The liberty taken by most Chinese aunts, uncles, and in-laws would cause very severe stress in American families...[3]

Again:

> ...Even though the biological family consists of parents and unmarried children everywhere, according to the American pattern of interaction it tends to become a collection of isolated dyads; according to its Chinese counterpart, no dyadic relationship is free from the larger network.[4]

In a similar vein, Sue and Sue state:

> In the traditional family, ancestors and elders are viewed with great reverence. The primary family

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[1]Francis L. K. Hsu, Americans and Chinese: Reflections on Two Cultures and Their People (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Natural History Press, 1972), pp. 81, 84.

[2]Ibid., p. 81.

[3]Ibid., p. 83.

[4]Ibid.

> unit is strong and typically exerts great control over its members. Emphasis is placed on being obedient to parents, and in giving the family a good name.[5]

In traditional Chinese culture, family structure is hierarchical as well as male-dominated. Age takes precedence over youth; decisions are usually made with little or no input from offspring -- even though there may be occasional input from an eldest son, particularly in a large family. By tradition, Chinese children owe their parents absolute obedience and respect. Filial piety decrees that obedience and respect be paid one's elders.[6] Passive acceptance of decisions made by elders is fostered; assertiveness is not countenanced. "He (the Chinese child) not only has to submit to his parents, but he also has little choice of his wider social relationships and what he individually would like to do about them."[7] Thus, a child in the traditional Chinese family has little experience in assertiveness or in decision-making -- on either an individual or group basis.

By contrast, the child from the dominant white culture in contemporary American society has experiences in both assertiveness and decision-making very early in life. The child is encouraged to contribute toward the formulation of family decisions regarding such matters as clothing, materials for leisure reading, programs for viewing on television, selection of toys and hobbies. Often the child's

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[5]Stanley Sue and Derald W. Sue, "Chinese-American Personality and Mental Health," Roots: An Asian-American Reader. Tachiki, Wong, Odo and Wong, eds. (UCLA Asian American Studies Center: Regents of the University of California, 1971), pp. 30-36.

[6]H. G. Creel, Confucius and the Chinese Way (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1960) pp. 73, 126, 305. Also, John King Fairbank, The United States and China (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 108-109.

[7]Hsu, ~~ibid.~~ op. cit., p. 84.

preference, opinion and other kinds of input are sought. In varying degrees the child participates in the decision-making -- at least on some levels and in some matters. Because "...most American parents encourage their children very early to do things for themselves -- to feed themselves, to make their own decision -- (this) leads the American child, to follow his own predilections."[8] But in the traditional Chinese family setting, the child's preference or opinion is neither sought -- nor countenanced should it be proffered. This is particularly true in first generation families; families still greatly influenced by first generation parents, and less pronounced in families experiencing varying stages of assimilation or acculturation.[9]

In both the traditional Chinese classroom and family settings, there is little opportunity to exercise assertiveness. The traditional Chinese mode of learning relies heavily upon rote memorization. The teacher reads the lesson aloud line by line; students repeat each line in unison. The student then studies the lesson at home, commits it to memory, and recites it verbatim to the teacher the next day. The lesson is also written from memory. Clearly, learning is by imitation and rote -- there is little analysis, interpretation, and synthesis. This learning style reinforces the tendency to conform and accept, rather than reform and change. For centuries, this was the normative educational

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Carole Chan, "The Chinese American: Inscrutable to Some," ERIC Document. May, 1975. Also, Lucie Cheng Hirata, "Youth, Parents, and Teachers in Chinatown," Urban Education, Vol. X, (October, 1975), 279-96. Also, Sue and Sue, op. cit., pp. 78-79 (for discussion of "traditionalist," "marginal man," and "Asian American" in relation to assimilation and acculturation).

process in China for practically everyone fortunate enough to have the leisure and opportunity for an education.[10] Today, this pedagogical style is still used in Chinese language schools in the United States. It contrasts sharply with diverse teaching styles found in American classrooms.

A further point of difference between American and Chinese culture patterns lies in the fact that:

> The American emphasis on self-expression not only enables the American child to feel unrestrained by the group, but also makes him confident that he can excel in it. The Chinese lack of emphasis on self-expression not only leads the Chinese child to develop a greater consciousness of the status quo but also serves to tone down any desire on his part to transcend the larger scheme of things.[11]

While on the one hand, children tend to be treated with diminishing differentiation on the basis of sex, at least as far as broad cultural norms are concerned in dominant American society, in Chinese tradition there is decided sex preference based on culture. Males are identified with the "yang" symbol denoting strength, brilliance, dominance, authority, and similar attributes. Females are identified with "yin," denoting weakness, dependence, softness, subservience and similar characteristics -- all of which suggest subordination to the male "yang" symbol. Further, "yin" is to "yang" as the sun is to the moon. The latter derives its light from the former; the moon is the reflected brilliance of the sun.[12]

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[10] Hsu, op. cit., p. 88.

[11] Ibid., pp. 89, 90.

[12] Dun J. Li, The Ageless Chinese (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons., 1965), pp. 93, 376. Also, C.P. Fitzgerald, China (New York: Praeger, Publishers, 1967), pp. 35, 113, 220, 412. Also, Holmes Welch, Taoism: The Parting of the Way (Boston: Beacon Press 1965), pp. 35, 131, 133. Also, Gunther Barth, Bitter Strength: A History of the Chinese in the United States, 1850-1870 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 28, 80, 212. Also, Creel, op. cit., pp. 73, 126, 305. Also, Fairbank, op. cit., pp. 108-109. Also, Hsu, op. cit.; pp. 76, 78-80.

Even though males held dominant roles as ruler, father, elder son, (as compared with young sons) and the role of authority figures in Chinese tradition, both male and female children had little or no experience in assertiveness and decision-making in the context of everyday life. Even an eldest son, if filial and thus dutiful, yielded to his parents and elders no matter how exalted his position. For example, Kuang-hsu, the last Manchu emperor, was manipulated under the guise of filial piety and "yin-yang" by his powerful aunt, the Empress-Dowager Tsu-hsi, throughout his reign.[13]

In addition to certain factors inherent in Chinese culture which influence behavior related to assertiveness and decision-making, there are patterns operating in American culture which tend to promote views of Chinese which are conducive to the development of a negative self-concept. This is particularly evident in children's stories, films, television programs, advertisements and comic books.[14]

Chinese individuals are often, if not always, depicted in "native costume" regardless of appropriateness to the situation or time frame. Needless to say, Chinese do not appear in ethnic dress on every and all occasions as some illustrations suggest. Thus, school resource materials depicting Chinese always in costume tend to promote one-dimensional, stereotypic views.[15]

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[13] Li, op. cit., p. 413.

[14] Michio Kaku, "Racism in the Comics," Chinese Americans: Realities and Myths. Joe Huang and Sharon Quan Wong eds. (San Francisco: The Association of Chinese Teachers, 1977), pp. 82-86. Also, Irvin Paik, "That Oriental Feeling, A look at the Cariatures of the Asians as Sketched by American Movies," Tachiki, Wong, Odo, and Wong, op. cit., pp. 30-36.

[15] Jean Wong, "Chinese American Identity and Children's Picture Books," ERIC Document. January 1971. Also, Jean Wong, "How Children's Books Distort the Asian American Image," Interracial Books for Children Bulletin, Vol. 7 (1976), pp. 3-5. Also, Pauline Wee Sue, "Promoting Understanding of Chinese-American Children," Language Arts, Vol. 53 (March, 1976), 262-266.

Television programs, advertisements, films, and comic books frequently depict Chinese males as self-effacing, obedient, self-sacrificing, lugubrious figures. They are also sly, wicked, mysterious, and untrustworthy. Moreover, oblique eyes are exaggerated, buckteeth are standard, and Chinese are subservient in demeanor. The Chinese female is portrayed either as a femme fatale, or as one ever susceptible to the white male character. In short, Chinese women are "China dolls" and sex symbols. Both men and women are willing props for white characters in any given story. Clearly, identification with any of these caricatures is not conducive to being assertive or to being able to contribute significantly in decision-making processes. Members of ethnic groups should be portrayed as individuals with multi-faceted personalities lest stereotypes continue to be perpetuated. Stereotypes have great impact. For example, as a result of stereotyping, an individual may behave in ways "acceptable" to members of the majority group. Moreover, members of the majority group frequently have certain expectations of minority group members which coincide with prevailing stereotypes. Studies suggest that where Chinese students are viewed as well-behaved, docile, and high achievers, teachers have expectations congruent with these qualities.

According to Sue and Sue:

> Teachers may believe that Chinese are intelligent and hard working and thus give them better grades. In the long run, side effects often develop. The individual may strive to maintain his hardworking image by being obedient and conforming. A Chinese who rebels

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[16]Connie Young Yu, "California Textbook Guidelines in Action," Interracial Books for Children Bulletin, Vol. 7 1976. pp. 30-32. Also, Kaku, op. cit., pp. 82-86. Also, Paik, op. cit., pp. 30-36.

[17]Sue and Sue, op. cit., p. 73.

against this stereotype faces the wrath of his teachers for violating their notions of a "good" Chinese.[18]

## Implications of Cultural Conditioning in the Classroom

In view of a comparative lack of decision-making experience among individuals raised in a traditional, first generation Chinese family or similar circumstances such as a family greatly influenced by first generation views, it is of critical importance that teachers and school administrators recognize cultural patterns frequently reflected in the behavior of Chinese students in the American classroom. Given basic contrasts in child-rearing practices, the average Chinese child, compared to the average dominant culture child, is less likely to speak up unless called upon by the teacher or person in charge of the classroom activity. By comparison, children from white American families are generally more assertive and more apt to volunteer views in both classroom and home settings.[19] According to Sue and Sue: "...Caucasion patterns of relating tend to stress assertive and spontaneous behaviors. The Chinese patterns of deference and reserve are at odds with these values."[20]

Children from the dominant white culture are, on the whole, more accustomed to being involved on various levels in the decision-making process than children in more traditional, authority-oriented Chinese family settings. Even though second-generation Chinese are more acculturated than their parents were, they and their children are still bound to a greater degree to traditional modes than their counterparts in the dominant

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[18] Ibid.

[19] Harry H. Kitano and Stanley Sue, "The Model Minorities," Journal of Social Issues, XXIX, No. 2 (1973), 1-9.

[20] Sue and Sue, op. cit., pp. 74-75.

white culture. This is due, at least in part, to the tendency of Chinese to live in segregated sections of a metropolitan area and to fall back on their own support systems for relief in social and familial problems.[21] It may also be attributed to conditions exacerbated by laws which excluded Chinese from the United States as well as to the fact that until contemporary times Chinese had little or no recourse to the judiciary system of the United States.[22] Thus, the Chinese as a group have tended to be insulated and self-reliant in a variety of ways. These circumstances tended to reinforce certain cultural patterns and traditions as well as strengthen the hold of the family over its members.

In the course of time, there developed among Chinese in the United States, a typology consisting of three groups; namely, the "traditionalist," the "marginal person," and the Asian American, also referred to as Chinese American.[23] In spite of a history of non-assertiveness, the Chinese American today is more assertive than were the immigrant, first generation, or even second generation Chinese. During the turbulent 1960's, Chinese Americans, greatly influenced by the thrust of the Black movement, took part in the formation of the Asian American movement. Drawing impetus from the Black movement, parallel action was taken by Chicanos, Japanese Americans, Native Americans and others.

Identification with the Chinese-American movement meant increased self-awareness, assertiveness, and involvement in decision-making. Consequently, there developed a growing breach between those holding

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[21] Rocky Chin, "New York Chinatown Today: Community in Crisis," Roots: An Asian-American Reader. Tachiki, Wong, Odo and Wong, eds., op. cit., p. 282.

[22] Barth, op. cit., pp. 179-80. On the many facets of Chinese immigration, see Barth, Bitter Strength, Chapter 3, "The Coming," op. cit., pp. 50-76.

[23] Sue and Sue, op. cit., pp. 78-79.

tenaciously to traditional Chinese views and those adhering to the movement espousing new awareness, ethnic identity and increased self-concept. The latter advocates cultural identity and acculturation. Assertiveness and greater control over one's destiny are inherent in the movement. Without the movement and all it stands for, Lau v. Nichols,[24] perhaps the epitome of Chinese assertiveness, would probably not have come to pass. Thus, the Chinese in America have evolved steadily from a self-conscious, seemingly unassimilable, culturally separate group to one which slowly became assimilated, and finally to one with considerable stake in acculturation.

Advocates of the Chinese-American movement have brought curricular and broad educational changes. For example, Asian studies programs have been given new impetus and have taken new direction. Groups such as The Association of Chinese Teachers (TACT) have broken fresh ground in the area of ethnic studies. Cross-culturalism has given new meaning to cultural identity, awareness, heightened self-concept, and assertiveness which, in turn, provide both encouragement and courage for assuming greater responsibility for one's own destiny via the decision-making process.

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[24] "Supreme Court Ruling on Chinese Children," Integrated Education, Vol. 12 (January, 1974), 33-35. Also, Decisions of the United States Supreme Court, 1973-74 Term. By Editorial Staff. United States Supreme Court Reports, Lawyer's Edition. (Rochester, New York: The Lawyers Co-operative Publishing Co., 1974), pp. 106-108. Also, Kinney Kinmon Lau, a minor by and through Mrs. Kam Wai Lau, his guardian, ad litem, et al., Petitioners, vs. Alan H. Nichols et al. No. 72-6520. Argued December 10, 1973. Decided January 20, 1974. Proceedings of the Bar and Officers of the Supreme Court of the United States. Proceedings before the Supreme Court of the United States. Washington, D.C., February 19, 1975, pp. 786-791.

## Conclusions

In spite of increased ethnic identity among minority group members today, there is still a great need to promote assertiveness, develop decision-making skills, and positive self-image. Curriculum developers, writers of textbooks and resource material can contribute greatly by creating conceptual frameworks with these goals in mind. These goals in the broader context of cultural pluralism preclude the presence of stereotypes in textbooks and all curricular material. Achievement of these goals decree the inclusion particularly in teacher training programs work in the essential areas of: cultural awareness, cross-cultural understanding, sensitivity to possible effects of stereotyping, and varying modes for developing positive self-image.